

LITHUANIA OFFERS TO DISCUSS A VOTE ON ITS SOVEREIGNTY

A CONCILIATORY MESSAGE

Republic's Leaders, Straining
to Break Impasse, Broach
a Popular Referendum

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VILNIUS, Lithuania, March 29 — Leaders of this republic's embattled independence government sent a signal of compromise to the Kremlin tonight, saying they were ready to discuss the difficult issue of a referendum on secession if President Mikhail S. Gorbachev agreed to talk with them.

The Lithuanian President, Vytautas Landsbergis, conceding that the Kremlin had greeted his pleas for negotiations with a "concrete wall," appeared to be searching openly for a conciliatory note that might entice Moscow to the negotiating table.

"There are no questions that cannot be discussed except the question of Lithuanian independence," Mr. Landsbergis said at a news conference. "The problem of the referendum could also be discussed."

Meeting Gorbachev's Complaints

The republic's Parliament declared Lithuania independent of Soviet rule 18 days ago without holding a referendum among Lithuanian citizens. This has been a particular complaint of Mr. Gorbachev as he continues to denounce the republic's secession as illegal and therefore nonnegotiable.

Mr. Landsbergis had previously belittled the referendum issue. He has said that Lithuania is not seeking permission to secede, but rather reclaiming the independence it lost 50 years ago when it was forcibly annexed by Stalin as a result of a Soviet nonaggression pact with Hitler.

An additional suggestion of compromise today was the outright endorsement of an independence referendum by Algirdas Brazauskas, the leader of the Lithuanian Communist Party, which broke away from the Soviet Communist Party in December. Mr. Brazauskas, also a Deputy Prime Minister of Lithuania, is viewed by the public as one of the few accomplished politicians here capable of dealing with the Kremlin.

'An Additional Ace'

"A referendum would be an additional ace in our negotiating position," said Mr. Brazauskas, who appeared at the Lithuanian President's side to propose that the independence issue be put to the voters.

Moscow is drafting a law on procedures for secession by Soviet republics. It includes requirements like a referendum, a five-year waiting period, satisfaction of economic claims and approval by the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies. The Baltic republics have said the draft law is unacceptable.

There has been no sign that Moscow is entertaining the notion of compro-

mise as the dispute over sovereignty continues. But Mr. Brazauskas noted that in his last visit to the Kremlin, on March 13, Mr. Gorbachev argued that Lithuania's failure to put the independence issue directly to the voters further weakened its position.

Buying Some Time

"He was insisting on the necessity of a referendum," Mr. Brazauskas said. While a vote might not change Mr. Gorbachev's opposition, the Lithuanian party chief said, it would make the republic's case much more emphatic.

Lithuanian leaders have repeatedly said that a referendum would show overwhelming support for independence. About 80 percent of the republic's people are of Lithuanian heritage, and the only real opposition to independence comes from non-Lithuanians. A referendum might give Mr. Gorbachev a bit of time and perhaps a chance to

Secessionists try to entice Moscow to the negotiating table.

preserve the illusion that Lithuania is following Moscow's rules, as other independence-minded republics anxiously watch the struggle.

The political chemistry at the press conference was interesting. Mr. Brazauskas, a bluff party careerist, showed a positive zest for political detail and speculation.

Mr. Landsbergis, a music professor who came to politics by way of the independence drive and prevailed over Mr. Brazauskas when a president was selected, maintained an icy, untrusting reserve toward the Kremlin. He reiterated that the Soviet authorities were waging a war of nerves in the republic, and he assailed the arrests of young Lithuanians who had deserted the Soviet Army in the name of patriotism.

Party Chief Projects Confidence

Mr. Brazauskas talked confidently of approaching Moscow with "a certain compromise, a certain firmness."

"I do not think Mr. Gorbachev has a very bad attitude toward Lithuania,"



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Vilnius considered discussing the difficult issue of a referendum.

Lithuania's fight for independence could cause President Mikhail S. Gorbachev to delay the changes to the Soviet economy. Economic Scene, Business Day, page D2.

he said. He said that despite the recent harassment of Lithuanians by the Soviet military, the Soviet President was "seeking a way out."

The joint press conference raised the question of whether a new strategy was being attempted by the Lithuanians.

Was Mr. Brazauskas, with his time-worn party credentials and populist appeal, finally assuming the role of realistic broker in the standoff between Moscow and Vilnius?

Deferring to Mr. Landsbergis, the party chief said he had his own government portfolio, the economy, not the role of political negotiator with Moscow. Mr. Landsbergis left the issue unresolved, lightly replying that Mr. Brazauskas was "not my employee."

Even so, Mr. Brazauskas's presence at the head table was certain to shore up popular enthusiasm for the hard-pressed independence drive, whatever the reaction from the Kremlin.

Soviet Army Offers Amnesty

During the day, the Government-controlled press in Moscow maintained its heavily propagandistic coverage of Lithuania. The reports emphasized calls for direct rule by Moscow from officials of the loyalist, rump Communist party, which was discredited in recent republic elections.

Moscow also offered amnesty today to Lithuanians who had deserted from the Soviet Army, pledging that they would not be punished if they returned to their units and resumed service. Those who do not return will be "searched out, detained and be subject to criminal punishment in accordance with current law," the Soviet press agency Tass quoted Defense Ministry officials as saying.

Hundreds of Lithuanian deserters have been in hiding in the republic. Noting that such soldiers are being taken into custody at the rate of 7 to 10 a day, Lithuanian officials said that Moscow's offers of amnesty rang hollow.

In some cases, the Lithuanian officials charged, Soviet patrols have been breaking into family homes to search for soldiers. Tass reported today that 51 Lithuanians had been sent back to their units, although it did not specify whether their return was forced or voluntary.

Asked how long Lithuania could reasonably hold out as the Kremlin ignores pleas for talks, Mr. Landsbergis cited polls demonstrating the popularity of the independence drive.

Mr. Brazauskas offered a more detailed reply, reporting that there had been "no deterioration in the supplies of gasoline or oil" provided by the national Government. He said the republic was managing despite banking restrictions imposed on the republic's accounts under a Moscow mandate.

Prague Offers to Mediate

PRAGUE, March 29 (Reuters) — In a message today to Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Landsbergis, President Vaclav Havel said the Czechoslovak Government was prepared to act as a mediator to help solve the Lithuanian standoff.



Tass via Reuters

President Vytautas Landsbergis of Lithuania's independence government is seeking negotiations with Moscow. He talked yesterday with the Prime Minister of the new government, Kazimiera Prunskiene.